

## Port Townsend Adoption Day ceremony officially unites parents with special-needs child

By Charlie Bermant  
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**Eight-year-old Max Burger throws a stuffed bear in the Jefferson County Superior Court courtroom Thursday after an adoption ceremony presided over by Court Commissioner Steven Gillard, left. Max's adoptive parents, Bill Burger and Sheri Burger, are at right. — Charlie Bermant/Peninsula Daily News**

PORT TOWNSEND — A special-needs child from the Ukraine was the sole adoptee during an Adoption Day ceremony in Port Townsend on Wednesday.

Eight-year-old Benjamin Maxim Burger, called “Max,” appeared in Jefferson County Superior Court in front of Court Commissioner Steven Gillard in a ceremony that underscored the plight of disenfranchised children and the need for people to adopt them.

“Right now, there are 9,800 children in the foster care system in Washington state, [and] 1,500 of them have lost their biological parents,” Gillard said.

“They are waiting to be adopted and are in need of parents who can commit to these children and provide them with a permanent, stable family.”

The child adopted by William and Sheri Burger of Port Orchard was born with Down syndrome, is currently nonverbal and requires a specific educational program, said his mother.

With training, he will have a full life and will be able to hold down a part-time job, Sheri Burger said, but he will always require special attention, which the family will provide during his — and their — entire life.

While the Burgers have had custody of Max for more than two years, Wednesday's ceremony makes their parenthood official.

The family chose to finalize the adoption in Port Townsend because Jefferson County is more hospitable with regard to the paperwork and procedures, Bill Burger said.

The Burgers have three children — ages 13, 20 and 23 — and wanted more, but Sheri Burger couldn't have another child.

The couple decided to adopt and first explored options in China but abandoned that effort because “China was not God's plan for us,” Sheri Burger said.

In 2009, two women they knew gave birth to children with Down syndrome, which the couple saw as a sign.

They met Max through Reece's Rainbow adoption agency. He was born Nov. 25, 2005 — around the same time they decided to adopt a special-needs child.

The family saw this as another sign that Max belonged with them, Sheri Burger said.

They traveled to Odessa in the Ukraine and built a relationship with Max, who was still in an orphanage.

In July 2011, the family took Max out of the orphanage to an apartment they had rented in Odessa and began the long journey to their home in Port Orchard.

"As we began to love on this child, we began to realize he had been in a very difficult situation," Sheri Burger wrote in a statement.

"Max could not walk well, he did not talk, he could not feed himself and was not potty trained.

"He did not know what a hug was. He did not even know what a kiss on the cheek was."

Since arriving in Washington, their son has become more social and happier, his parents say.

He doesn't yet speak but can communicate through sign language and understands language.

This is the fourth year that Jefferson County has participated in the national Adoption Day ceremony.

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